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ABSTRACT

This report examines critical issues that rural educators face in establishing preschool programs. Even Start is a federal program designed to meet the educational needs of preschool children who have under-educated parents. In addition to participating in their child's education, the program requires parents to enroll in educational or vocational training programs. External evaluators analyzed accountability, program effectiveness, and impact of a rural Even Start program established during the 1991-92 school year. Techniques such as participant observation, ethnographic investigation, interviewing, and surveys were employed. Because the federal government was late in awarding funds, early obstacles included finding a physical location for the program, hiring staff, and promoting community awareness of the program. Other barriers were limited community support, competition among four established preschool programs, and problems associated with the adult education component of the program. Although census data indicated about 350 eligible preschoolers, only 3 students and 2 parents participated during the 5-month program. These findings suggest that rural educators should carefully review new federal programs to determine if additional preschool programs are warranted. In addition, better coordination of program design, funding, and management of resources is needed at the federal, state, and local levels to prevent duplication of services. (LP)

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Establishing Rural Even Start Programs: Lessons Learned From a Demonstration Project

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Running Head: EVEN START PROGRAM

Abstract

Rural educators are confronted with immense problems that cry out for solutions. The poverty cycle, under-education, disintegration of traditional rural families, and unfulfilled human potential often lead to heated public discussions of possible solutions. Common wisdom suggests that these problems are best dealt with at an early developmental stage (Children's Defense Fund, 1992). One possible solution is early childhood education or early family intervention programs. We believe that early childhood interventions programs will move into the fore-front as a preventative measure to solve many of these difficult problems (e.g., Adams & Sandfort, 1992). Even Start, one of the most recent established Federal programs, was envisioned to meet early childhood education needs of children who have under-educated parents. This new program goes beyond the traditional scope and interventions of Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; parents must become involved in the educational or vocational training programs along with participating in their child's early education. This research focuses on the important questions that rural Even Start Programs must face during program implementation. Findings suggest rural educators should carefully review new federal programs in order to determine if additional preschool programs are warranted; additionally, better coordination of programs designing, establishing, funding, and management of resources is critically needed at federal, state, and local levels in order to better meet the needs of rural preschoolers.

Introduction

Even Start is the last in a series of early childhood programs designed to improving the quality of care, education, and training of young children. Rural educators are aware that there many programs already exist for this population; at least nine federally funded programs assisting preschool children are available from five federal agencies (Keith and Fortune, 1993). These preschool programs have as many as five overlapping program components among them (e.g. child education, parenting training, parent job training, and health and nutrition education). In some rural areas 2 to 5 year old eligible children appear to be a real premium and federal programs may be competing for bodies. Furthermore, many eligible rural families may simply not be interested in participating in the Even Start Programs, yet they continue to be counted as needing services and funds continue to flow. The purpose of this presentation is to provide an examination of critical issues that rural educators face in establishing Even Start Programs. We believe that there is a need for better coordination among programs which have a preschool program component than there is a need for more programs.

Theoretical background

History demonstrates that political, economic, and social changes influence the rural family (i.e. Zoe & Kelly, 1988). Since Civil War times, when workers were needed in ammunition and clothing manufacturing until today when there is a shortage of skilled high tech workers, women not currently in the labor force (women at home with their children) have been viewed as a valuable labor resource (O'Connel & Bloom, 1987). Families living in rural areas of the country are also influenced by national economic trends; these changes constantly

reshape American society and the family (Reich, 1987). The post World War II period helped to establish the traditional family with one wage earner. Yet, today's rural families are keenly aware that the current economic climate often necessitate that families earn two wages. Furthermore, an unfriendly world economy, the women's movement, the growth of the single parent families and female-headed households, and declining birth rates are just a few of the trends that influence women to spend less time at child rearing. Obviously, there is a need for quality preschool programs (National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, 1992); the Federal government can not overlook these developments (Hofferth & Phillips, 1987).

The Even Start program, established in the late 1980's, is the latest example of how the federal government is responding to the call for preschool programs. Since the early 1940's the federal government has responded to the call for quality child care programs. During World War II, the Lanham Act established the first funds for programs for preschool children. Interest in child care programs declined after the War. In the early 1950's interest again emerged, but with a different focus -- child care programs were related to welfare. Later in the 1960's, when welfare reform was in the foreground, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare had a vested interest in this area. The Great Society ideology of "social responsibility" became a rally call and many new programs were established. Subsequent establishment of the Department of Education further assisted the growth of preschool programs. During the 1970's and 1980's special interest or stakeholder groups, growing in number and power, helped to establish programs for special groups (handicapped, ethnic, poor, and minority groups).

Rural educators appear to have a smorgasbord of federally funded programs available to them today (e.g. Even Start, Head Start, Child Find,

Chapter 1, Child Feed, WIC, AFDC, etc.). As might be expected when programs are established during various historical and political periods, the theoretical framework of the programs vary. Programs have found their homes in the Department of Labor, Department of Agriculture, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Department of Justice, and Department of Education. The theoretical frameworks of these programs reflect the orientation of the sponsoring agency. Federal agencies have viewed preschool needs from the following perspectives: labor factors, nutritional and health needs, basic and remedial education issues, and welfare, correctional, and preventative concerns.

Method

A case study was conducted a rural country that was establishing an Even Start Program during the 1991-1992 school year. As the Programs' external evaluators, we utilized qualitative and quantitative research methods to perform accountability analysis, program effectiveness analysis, and impact analysis. Techniques such as participant observation, ethnographic investigation, interviewing, surveys, content analysis, and examination of descriptive statistics were employed.

Results

The evaluation of the Even Start Programs, during their implementation year, is important and demonstrates why evaluations by external evaluators have a important role to play when federal funds are awarded. Unfortunately for the Even Start Program being evaluated, the federal government was late in notifying and awarding funds to establish the Program. Since the school year had already started, many obstacles (e.g. finding physical locations for the program, hiring staff, letting the community know that the program was to be established, etc.)

were encountered from the beginning; this influenced significantly the programs outcomes and the results of the evaluation.

Although the agency hired a competent director (a well-known community leader and respected kindergarten teacher), there was limited community support for the program; competition existed between four established preschool programs for clients, and many barriers were present in the adult education component of the program. The Program was able to successfully establish a program accountability system and instituted mechanism to met local and federal program sponsors requirements. Measuring program outcomes were difficult; impact analysis were limited due to the Programs inability to attract clients. During the five months of operation three students and two parents participated in the program. What happened to this rural Even Start Program? We expect that this is not an isolated case of happens in rural areas when new federal programs are being implemented. The discussion that follows presents a review of important factors that are often present when programs are being implemented in rural areas.

Discussion

Results of this evaluation might lead some to question if there was a need to establish this Program. Review of census data showed approximately 350 eligible preschoolers for participation in the Even Start program. During program recruitment it was discovered that only about 17 were not participating in some other type of preschool program. Most children were in the Head Start Program; the remaining children were in Women Infants and Children (WIC), Child Find, Child Feed, Chapter 1, or Labor Child care programs. This Even Start program was established in the normal way; an local agency responded to a request for proposal (RFP), followed federal guidelines, competed nationally with other

agencies for funding, and was awarded funding to establish the program. We are certain that this example is not an isolated case of what is happening across the country. It may be possible that more funding is needed for preschool programs. Since federal programs do overlap, and many programs were competing for the same clients there must be present other problematic factors that are not readily apparent.

Perhaps part of the problem is related to eligibility requirements. For participation in some programs the parents must be on welfare, be poor, or meet low income standards. While in other programs the parents must be adjudicated. For participation in programs where the child is the primary client, the child must have a recognizable handicap, or live within a low income, poor, or crime-infested neighborhood, or be classified as "at risk". We believe that there are some eligible rural families who meet eligibility criteria for the various federal programs who simply may not be interested in participation. Some possible reasons for non-enrollment of preschool aged children may be due to family life styles, regional mores, and transportation and scheduling issues.

Although many have come to accept the notion that mothers with small children work outside of the home, there are parents who believe "a mother's place is at home with her children". In this situation, both partners' parenting style may negate their participation in these programs. Still other rural family structures, those more traditional in nature, may be comprised of a man who objects to his wife continuing her education, receiving job training, or working outside of the house. Therefore, even if the wife is interested in participating in some kind of program, the husband's attitude may preclude her and the preschooler from participating in the program.

Families may also have a positive or negative predisposition toward federal programs. For example, families with an established tradition of enrollment into

federal programs may be more interested in or even expect the government to support their children during the pre-school years. Still other rural families may have a negative predisposition toward the government interfering in the development and training of their children and choose not to participate.

Besides family predispositions there may also be regional or geographical propensities toward federal programs. Families in large cities may have different attitudes about preschool programs than do families who live in rural regions of the country. Families living in New York City, rural Appalachia, or the mid-west may simply not all have the same wants or needs. Yet, programs are designed to offer the same "treatments" to all.

Related to regional differences are transportation and scheduling issues. In some areas of the country the roads and the availability of vehicles for transporting children, along with the distance between the families home and the program, may cause some families to choose not to participate in the program. Similarly, coordination of work and school (if other children are in the family) schedules may simply become to burdensome for some rural families and they may not want to bother with the program.

Many of these "other factors" were operating in the Program evaluated. Perhaps these unknown elements demonstrate why a rural region of the country, on paper, appeared to need another preschool program, yet, in reality that area had reached the majority of eligible and interested clients in the region with already existing programs. Therefore, did the federal government need to fund another preschool program?

Summary and Recommendations

Federal preschool programs have expanded dramatically since the early 1940's and will continue to expand in the 1990's. The Even Start Program is the

latest example of the federal governments efforts to met the needs of preschool children from 2 to 5 years of age. Currently, five federal agencies fund nine or more programs for preschool children; a number of these programs overlap and have similar eligibility criteria. Many of today's federally funded programs appear to be competing for the same preschool "bodies". Furthermore, some eligible rural families with preschool children may simply not be interested in participating in federally funded programs, yet they continue to be counted and agencies continue to receive funding to provide services to them.

Since preschool programs are currently perceived as one mechanism through which many of today's national issues can be resolved, coordination of preschool services at the national, state, and local level is needed. An easy, no cost, step would be to establish at the RFP level a section in the proposal where agencies interested in receiving funding document all of the local and state services that are in existence and demonstrate how additional money would fill a need that is not already funded by another agency. Furthermore, there is the expectation that educational clearinghouses in State Departments of Education function in such a manner. State Departments of Education may fail to adequately monitor and fulfill this roles because on typically they review proposals on a post hoc basis to development. In the example presented here, the clearinghouse possibly did not function.

Before awarding a contract, joint federal reviews should be initiated where there exist overlapping programs across agencies. This review process should include documentation and information on other funding received by the grantees to determine project overlaps. For instance, Even Start funding should include determination of funding overlaps with Head Start, Chapter 1, Special Education initiatives, Child Feed, and other programs.

Finally, external evaluators -- external from the agency giving the

funding, the state receiving the funding, and the agency accepting the funding -- should be required to perform a needs assessment during the program's implementation year. These evaluators should also perform formative and summative reviews to help monitor possible duplication of services, reduce double counting of targeted clients and competition among programs for bodies, assist in gathering information about "uninterested clients", and generally provide periodic reviews to funding sources.

In conclusion, although federal funds may be available to establish Even Start Programs in rural areas it is prudent for rural educators to determine beforehand if there is a need to establish another preschool program in their area to met the needs of rural preschoolers.

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